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Table d'Hôte 1924

MARCH 1924  
Panama  
Colombia

~~Table d'Hôte~~, March 25, 1924

In place of letters which must be à la carte and laboriously one at a time I propose to try something table d'hôte, to be sent in the large hope that in spite of wanderings (of body and mind) I'll still contrive to keep in touch with a few simpaticos.

Arguments could be made for a type of communication that would not suffer from the impersonality, discretion, formality, and general paralysis of the public prints, nor yet be limited in range of subjects and in number of friends reached, and by the tedium of the mere long-hand writing - as is the usual letter. But no arguments can define the opportunity as well as trying to seize it, nor can any prospectus pretend to be as satisfactory as experiment - so here goes.

At times you'll suffer from Burton Holmesickness for there'll be too much travel - and often you'll see old stuff long since unloaded in conversation - but I shall try to describe experiences, report observations, and propose theories just as each happens to interest me - and in the honest hope that if any of it interest you you'll feel to compare notes and write me - or at least intend to - for after all even that is something.

#### Experience

Nothing recently - unless it be renting a suburban house and hunting and hiring a cook for the first time in my life and getting used to the rough mannish talk of the average commuter in the seat behind - has been as much fun as a trip I made last November to Bogotá, Colombia.

United Fruit S.S. Carillo via Kingston, Panama, Cartagena to Barranquilla, and thence by a Scadta hydroplane to Girardot 600 miles up the Rio Magdalena to Girardot and thence by train up 7,000 feet to the sabana of Bogotá.

From Barranquilla at the mouth of the Magdalena River inland to Girardot is 600 miles long. River steamers of the old Mississippi type make the trip in 7 to 21 days. It is a huge warm tropical river meandering in its lower two thirds through forests that proved almost impassable to the first Spaniards and their horses. The trip took them 6 months. And now you can fly in a German hydroplane the whole distance in 8 hours! The most exciting trip I ever made.

We left the hangar at 6 A.M. as the dawn came over the snow covered distant 14,000 foot peaks near Sta. Marta. I certainly got a kick out of the first rush over the water, the roaring slapping struggle to get off the water, and the delicious smoothness and ease of flight once you are off the earth. But the second time we rose after a wait for the fog to clear found time for some notes:

Just taking canvas covering off propeller again. Gosh this is fun! We'll go like the devil along this broad steaming river soon - yes propellers

going NOW faster and faster. River's ever so smooth and the sun of 8:20 is blazing down on us. Mud huts from up topside - - - Hooray! I had to stop. It's wonderful - bouncing along at the beginning, and leaving the water is grand - so suave and yet so swift. I get a kick out of flying all right - it's enough like my dreams of flying to be fascinating. We're plunging along as I write at just about the right height for the most appreciation, and just the height I like in my dreams. Really amazing how similar the feeling is! The only new things are the bumps and the noise and the speed - the essential feeling is the same.

The Rio Magdalena is tremendous, smooth, warm, covered with dislodged green floating plants and mottled with muddy eddies. On either bank a sheer rise of mud and then underbrush and the dark green forest stretching off to far distant mountains.

Now we're climbing rapidly - to cut across the curves of this winding river we must fly over long stretches of forest and you must have height to coast back to water. Our shadow is small and races over lakes and woods. Now it's quite bumpy. Trees that looked first like heads of dark lettuce and then like pincushions look like thumbtacks now.

Gosh this is WONDERFUL! We're above clouds now - the machine registers 400 meters. Lord this is a trip! Enormous valley - blue at the edges and beneath us bright green and muddy brown in vast blotches. Blue, snow capped mountains 10-14,000 feet high in northeast - glorious fagged things apparently 70 miles away.

Just flew over a pair of bright blue birds with scarlet heads (macaws?) They were distressed and disappeared in the deep green below and behind us.

We're down low now from the 600 meters of a little while ago.

Oh slick! Just flew over a strip of mud bar - sand beach and looked right down on 6 big alligators playing possum.

The car - or rather space we're in - two of us - is about the size of a Ford back seat and I look out of a window just as though I were in a train - an open window. If my elbow is outside the wind is so strong it billows the muscles. And to my face it does a wild and steady massage - muy fuerte

Now we've stopped once to pick up and leave mail, at a little thatched-roof-and-adobe town. And then, racing over the water which in the brightness of the day did look like a streak of blue mud - and then from battling the water great broadside spats we suddenly felt released and happy and the motor from a frantic roar settled down to a steady hum as though it had finally joined the leisure class or gotten a living wage or something.

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We're quite well up now - the little disc which is in front of our window to the front seat where sit the pilot and his mechanic, and is marked "Höhe in Km." marks 800 meters now. And the world begins to look large and fuzzy and a little inhuman.

Yes here come the mountains! And behind this huge alluvial plain all so filled with meandering streams, lakes, pools, slews, bayous, lagoons, that I can't tell where the Magdalena really is. We're going to leave them to the right. "Kodak as you go!" No! we've just gone up and over that mountain! Why that was a mountain, all covered with palms - and the only way I can tell its a hill is that the trees in the center looked near somehow.

Lakes and ponds look from here like irregular saucers of treacle with brilliant green mould growing around the edges. Kodak again.

I must say that when the engine missed a minute ago something about the size of my fist took three twists inside me. Lends to the excitement. Yoho! here we go down. Lord! feels like the magnified essence of a roller coaster. Not till you go down do you believe the dial that says 135 kilometers per hour.

Never saw that before! A lake so inroaded by some plant that only an irregular patch in the center fails to be the yellow green of the inside of a lettuce head. All yellow green. And here's another kind up ahead - and now under us. It looked like polished malachite - one green shade inside another in wavy bands. There's a little biddy alligator - gosh we're at 700 meters and that's why.

My companion, Señor Barriga has just waked from a nap. As he was terrified during the first hours he is amazed to be told he has slept 20 minutes. Pleased? Why I have just written on a piece of paper "Sangfroid!" and showed it to him and he beamed then bowed and asking permission rapidly tore off the strip of paper, folded it carefully, and put it in his pocketbook - doubtless to convince an admiring family of his coolness in great peril. Tartarin!

Down at a fearfully hot place for lunch. Two little puppies playing in the hotel courtyard made me think of Ninny. Puppies were raging over the possession of a huge passion flower as big as the head of one of them --- two school boys quarreling over Mary Garden.

Well, off again. Lord this is a roaring good trip. I'll tell you what it's like. It's as though you hitched the tonneau of a Ford midway on the roof of an eighty foot corrugated iron bath house, got a six cylinder motor attached to a huge electric fan pulling air over you like a gale, and the whole works were softly suspended in space wherein it bumped up and down like a restless elevator. And every time you looked out of the window the first thing you saw was the corrugated iron roof, firm and sure - and the next was a slipping sliding tropical jungle 1,500 feet below. And over on the horizon 7 distinct mountain ranges one after another in successively paler shades of blue.

It's 5:15 now and we're up in mountainous country again at 800 meters and its very bumpy. Over to the west there is a magnificent stretch of mountains blue and darkening in the sunset. The Cordilleras - 14-17,000 feet high and covered with snow - what I thought was clouds proves to be a vast saddleback and crest of snow. We're at 1,000 meters now, and the shadows are erasing the valleys in a deepening haze - green-brown below, smoke-blue far away.

9 P.M. - Hotel Inglesa Girardot

At 6:15 we saw the lights of Girardot and with a series of great curving, slanting swoops we turned and settled on the river, skimming, slapping, and finally splashing like a great wild duck.

As soon as I was out of the machine and with my ears still roaring so I could hardly hear, there was the inevitable commission of medicos who took me to the hotel. Gave them weeski soda and when they showed no signs of any terminal facilities, I asked 'em to supper. Worried along in Portuguese - I could understand them but they only pretended to comprehend me. My, I am weary.

And may there be no humming at the bar\* when I put out the light.

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En route to Panama

There is a very amusing clown aboard - United States Rubber Company man from New Rochelle. Young, tall, stoop-shouldered, with no chin, an enormous stung-by-a-bee upper lip, and a strange facial paralysis - the effect is extraordinary. It's enough of a handicap apparently, to have sharpened his wits so that he escapes depressing or even disgusting people, by his clowning - which he does very well.

He says he met a Dartmouth student from Shelby, Montana whose idea of a vacation is to leave Shelby with ten cents in his pocket and see how far he can go (and return) in two months. In the summer of 1922 he got to Chicago and back and was forty dollars to the good on the return. How had he managed it? "Well, I got in with a guy just outa three years in Joliet. All pale he was - and say he had a trick! He could make his nose bleed just like hell by kinda bitin' his upper lip! Well, we had it fixed up so he'd go into a kinda fit on the street near a good store and bleed an' I'd fan him an' tell the crowd he was gassed in France and pass the hat. God! We'd ha' cleared a million dollars if his nose had only ha' held out!"

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Note to Investors: Mr. Di Georgio, an Italian banana king of N.Y. said that a stalk of bananas which costs \$4.20 in New Orleans cannot possibly on the most liberal estimate cost more than \$1.00 to raise and put there. I suggested that the United Fruit Company may have some influence in Central American governments. "Why it owns those governments body and soul," was Di G's reply.

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Doubt:

In the Vallery-Radot Life of Pasteur appear references to "gentlemen of the old school" with the inevitable adjectives "polite, dignified, and gentle."

It seems to me that if every age refers to its elders in these terms then it must be singularly easy for humans between the ages of 60-70 to be gentle,  
\*mosquito

dignified, and polite --- the usual inferences about decay of manners are to be greatly discounted. Holmes observed that men are like apples - sweetest just before they go rotten. It's true that if a man of thirty has a trace of fine manners something can indeed be said for his "school", but what is proved by a kindly old buzzard of seventy roosting in the carefree gentle satiety of his old age?

Theory:

Why do old people enjoy harrowing stories? The connection of sorrow and white hairs is close - but it's usually the other way, white hairs glorying in horror or ingratitude or irremediable tragedy, and retelling dreadful stories with a strange insistence.

I suppose that very deaf people must enjoy a boiler factory - "Here" they feel "we can still hear as well as we ever did. After all our senses are alive." So old folks with their emotional fires banked, love to feel the old quickening of horror or of sympathy and like a jaded addict - and they are addicts of the stimulant known as life - they'll blow themselves to any horror for the dim thrill they still get out of it.

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If in the future I come to be traveling again, I'll send full notes to the office at 61 Broadway - and they'll send you future sheets of this - but fresher from the field.

Good luck